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Penn. Lawmaker: Guard Guns Are Empty

The Associated Press

Friday, May 31, 2002; 8:36 AM

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YORK, Pa. — Pennsylvania

National Guard troops have been patrolling the state's five nuclear power plants with unloaded weapons, according to a state lawmaker.

House Minority Whip Mike Veon's comment in Friday's York Daily Record followed statements from guardsmen last week that they had been banned from carrying loaded weapons while on patrol at Pennsylvania airports following the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

The Pennsylvania National Guard would not confirm either report or comment on its staffing.

"Our soldiers are armed and fully capable of defending themselves and carrying out their assigned missions," said guard spokesman John Maietta.

State police who also patrol the nuclear plants carry loaded weapons, said state Rep. Bruce Smith, who requested National Guard troops at Three Mile Island. He said he was comfortable with that arrangement.

Veon said he was trying to get Gov. Mark Schweiker and the guard to change its policy on loaded weapons.

"I don't understand their philosophy on security, quite frankly," Veon said. "Those precious seconds could cost some of them dearly."

Earlier this month, Schweiker announced that troops and state police would continue to provide additional security at the nuclear power plants through the end of the year.

Dave Hixson, a spokesman for Schweiker, said appropriate action would be taken if someone tried to breach security at the plants.

"If somebody comes up to the plant gate and starts firing, I don't think they're going to ask questions," Hixson said. "They're going to start firing."

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Guard units in Arkansas and Massachusetts also stationed soldiers at their nuclear power plants following the Sept. 11 attacks, but their guns were loaded, officials in those states told the Daily Record.

At the state's airports, The Philadelphia Inquirer reported Sunday that guardsmen had carried loaded magazines on their belts but not loaded weapons. The Inquirer based its report on interviews with several guardsmen who said they had been banned from carrying loaded weapons while patrolling at 16 airports in the state, including Philadelphia International Airport, which the guardsmen left May 10.

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